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Theodore Huff

Historian and Filmmaker

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Because the independent media artworld was still in the process of formation before the 1950s, we face several problems in trying to understand early avant-garde film. Today at least some formal institutions exist, however limited they may be, which carry on the financing, training, production, distribution, exhibition, preservation, and criticism of independent work. But before the 1950s, such structures cannot be taken for granted. The matrix of diverse institutions and individuals who create and sustain the specific works produced as well as artistic careers was characterized by uneven development.

Considered in terms of his various roles in an emerging film culture, Theodore Huff's life offers an instructive look into independent film and cinema studies as they were in the process of becoming institutionalized.¹ Huff's primary artistic contribution to early U.S. avant-garde cinema consisted of work on two major films: *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand* (1933), made with John Flory, which mixed realism and fantasy in a comic satire of the Depression, and *The Uncomfortable Man* (1948), made with Kent Munson, a psychodrama of an alienated young man in New York City. As an amateur filmmaker he worked on several films in the 1930s and 1940s that are typical of independent cinema of the time, but he remains best remembered today for the Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society, organized by William K. Everson in the 1950s in New York, which continues regularly to screen classic film art. Professionally, Huff is remembered as a film historian whose examination of Chaplin's films, *Charlie Chaplin*,² was the first substantial and scholarly book-length study of a director written in the United States. It now appears that he was, in addition, instrumental in discovering and preserving the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, which has given scholars an essential

archive of early U.S. silent film. Huff was also a collector, archivist, critic, silent-film accompanist, film society regular, college teacher, and acquaintance and friend of numerous people involved in creating and sustaining film culture.

The basic facts of his life and career provide a useful framework for understanding Huff's place in the film culture of his era. Born 20 December 1905, Edmund Newell Huff, Jr., was the first of three sons of a physician and his wife living in Englewood, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City. The father later deserted the family, and Junior changed his name to Theodore while in college. The boy grew up only a short distance from the Fort Lee, New Jersey, movie studios, which had their heyday during World War I. Fort Lee, across from upper Manhattan at the George Washington Bridge, provided outdoor locations, including bluffs overlooking the Hudson River and residential settings in Englewood. Although production there declined rapidly when most of the film industry moved to Hollywood after World War I, as a child and adolescent Huff saw films being made in his community and hung around the studios, catching glimpses of stars and seeing the production process.

The young man attended prep school at Phillips Exeter. Adolescent writings include a parody of the silent newsreel, "Passé News," and mock melodramas that exaggerate silent-film conventions: "The Strand Theatre Presents the Super-colossal Epic 'A Little Child Shall Lead Them' or 'The Pit Falls of a Big City,' Directed by D. W. de Reel." These parodies imitate comic features published in *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture World*, and other film periodicals that Huff collected. In the 1920s he provided piano accompaniment for silent films at summer theaters, a skill he also used later. He graduated from all-male Princeton in 1928, a year later than the rest of his entering class. There he participated in drama club activities, as he had in prep school. A revealing news photo shows him gathered with other students outdoors during the screen-test filming of some Princeton students by a Hollywood camera crew on a "talent search" promotion. His passion for cinema is clear in two English composition essays written at Princeton: one argues that Lillian Gish is the greatest actress of the day, and the other that D. W. Griffith is "the greatest artist of the Twentieth Century."

After graduation Huff spent several years working on Wall Street, according to a self-prepared promotional statement, but it can be surmised from some of his journals that he was unemployed or under-

employed as the Great Depression proceeded. At this time he began making films and screening them at various Amateur Cinema League (ACL) meetings. For a short time he was involved with the left-wing Workers Film and Photo League, attending meetings and crewing for Ralph Steiner on documentary shoots. In December 1935 he joined the staff of the newly created Museum of Modern Art Film Library, the first museum archive, exhibition program, and noncommercial distribution service for film as an art form in the United States. He wrote to a friend, "My main job is arranging the musical accompaniment for the old silent pictures (I used to play in a summer theatre, have some of the old "movie" music, and was always interested in that field)."³ He also seems to have put his own substantial collection of stills and other film materials at MOMA's service.

Huff was dismissed, officially because of a budget constriction, in May 1940, and began substantial work on his biography of Chaplin.⁴ His next employment was with the Motion Picture and Sound Recordings Department of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where, beginning in July 1942, he catalogued and described films, including captured German ones. This job ended in early 1946 with the demobilization. Two letters from this time refer to Huff's getting a position as "Director, Motion Picture Department, United Nations Headquarters," but that job fell through, as did a television job a few years later with the American Broadcasting Corporation, with no explanation in the available documents. He did some work in the late 1940s for the National Broadcasting Corporation, reviewing silent comedies, particularly the "Our Gang" films, for screening on the *Howdy Doody Show*. Huff examined them for broadcast suitability and apparently also edited out some offensive ethnic humor.

In the immediate postwar world, beginning in fall 1946, Huff began teaching film history and introduction to filmmaking on an adjunct basis in the Motion Picture Department at New York University. He also taught film history at the University of Southern California in the summer of 1948 and went on to the Film Institute at City College of New York that fall. During this time he also co-directed two films with his former NYU student Kent Munson, finally found a publisher for his Chaplin book, and wrote the *Sight and Sound* "indexes" for Chaplin and Ernst Lubitsch. These were scholarly historical listings of the works of major directors (dates of production, release, cast and crew lists, etc.) and involved considerable painstaking research.

He began the 1950s with a civil service job as a film reviewer (writing catalogue copy) and then became an assistant casting director for the U.S. Army Signal Corps, which made training films at studios in Astoria, Long Island. He continued to be active in film circles and to write; among other projects, he met and gathered materials on the emerging filmmaker Stanley Kubrick. The reviews of his Chaplin book were very favorable, and it was subsequently published in England and, in translation, in France and Italy. Encouraged, Huff said he hoped to write the definitive history of the movies. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage at his mother's house on Long Island on 15 March 1953. The bare facts of his professional life indicate the many different situations in which this figure in an emerging film culture found himself. Clearly some of this is to be expected in any inchoate field: refined division of labor usually comes after growth has produced a complexity that demands specialization.

In studying Huff, we see the situation of an emerging independent cinema in relation to a larger corporate capitalist industrial system, and in particular the situation of the individual intellectual worker within that system. The large-scale mass media systems of the modern era—the corporate and industrial production and diffusion of sound/image material—need intellectual workers, skilled specialists whose labor is primarily conceptual, who work within, around, and in relation to these systems. Today we experience these social formations and the intellectuals who fit into them in a fairly complex and articulated state: we understand and expect specialist division of labor. In looking at Huff's career, however, we see someone who does not occupy a simple or single position, but rather fits into several different positions at different times depending upon the evolution of the field. He is a "generalist," an intellectual handyman, who can fit into many different, changing, and evolving sites of the system as a whole. As an intellectual worker, much of the time he is part of the army of surplus labor. He can be brought into service when the evolving system needs certain key skills or types of knowledge, but as an individual he is never strong enough actually to command a premium for his specialized abilities.

Huff represents a permanent component of the independent filmmaking world: people who do not achieve high distinction in their own work, but whose talents are essential to the success of collaborative works. In particular, his expertise in the conventions of silent-film narration allowed him to provide highly accomplished camerawork and editing in

the films he made with John Flory and Kent Munson. By considering his filmmaking in sequence, we can see the achievements and changing historical moments of the independent sector.

FIRST FILMS

Huff's notes indicate that he wrote the burlesque Western *Hearts of the West* for the First Lake Follies in August 1926, which would have been during his college years. There is no further information on this summer entertainment, but he indicates that he rewrote it in April 1929 and includes the information that he brought a second-hand projector at that time. Production began during summer 1929 with a cast of amateur child actors, dragged on into the fall with weekend shooting, and was revived in the spring. The first finished version was duplicated the next summer, but technical problems and additional shooting of titles and re-staging sequences delayed screening for the ACL until March 1931. According to his production diary, Huff continued to make changes, including re-staging, re-shooting, and tightening sequences, until January 1933: for example, "Aug. 9 [1931] changes in horses (after seeing *Birth of a Nation*)."

The juvenile movie announces its parody status from the opening titles:

Ideal-Supreme Pictures presents D. W. DeReel's *Hearts of the West*. A D. W. DeReel Production with Rex Montague and Gloria Gishford. Copyright 1915 by Ideal-Supreme Pictures, Inc. Issac Ginsberg, President.

This is a simple story of simple people. Down through the ages, since the beginning of Time, there has beaten in the hearts of all Mankind the Eternal yearning for Love. . . .

The children impersonating adult stars are well directed and maintain the illusion without mugging and breaking role. A barroom scene opens the film with a series of simple sight gags, such as blowing the foam off a beer onto someone else. When the villain paws a dance-hall girl, the sheriff kicks him out of the saloon, and he and the girl fall in love. The bad guy then kidnaps the dancer and takes her to his cabin. Duane, the sheriff, looks unsuccessfully for Nell, the barroom entertainer, until an Indian tells him where she is. Cross-cutting between the villain menacing the girl and

the rescuer on his way heightens suspense. In a medium shot of Duane riding to the rescue, a moving cyclorama backdrop repeats the same scenery flowing behind the hero. A final fight on a cliff (the same Palisades used in Fort Lee productions fifteen years earlier) ends with the villain falling off and dying. The happy ending shows the couple living in a mansion. Huff wrote an original score for the accompaniment.

His production diary begins 6 July 1929: "went about trying to borrow money, to bank, etc. (had only \$65)." This must have been a time of unemployment, since he notes that he "left Laidlaw's" on 20 June. He worked a few days a week on preproduction (scouting locations, building a set, arranging for horses, scouting talent, etc.) in July, and began almost daily production in August, once his camera, lights, and other equipment arrived (he found he could charge the purchase). The production diary reveals all the predictable problems of putting on a dramatic film with child amateur actors in the summer. Kids do not show up or are away on vacation; they get restless in the heat; a shoot is rained out; he rents horses that run away during the shoot; the boys fight with each other; doubles must be found for no-shows. In mid-September he goes job hunting at Chemical Bank and Chase Bank. Hired at Chase (he loses the job a year later), he then works on weekends to finish the project. "Sun. Oct. 20 —To Dean Street (double for Heffron) Plenty of trouble. A tough gang watched us—names, stole stuff—actors refused to ignore them. Police chased, but returned." Some of his principal talent gets tired of the project and does not want to participate in re-takes. Finally, in December, while shooting in the cold weather, he decides to start again in the spring. He begins again in April, working only on Sundays, and has to pay some of the boys five dollars to get additional shots. At one point he is arrested while scouting a location (fig. 8.1).

Hearts of the West is an extremely ambitious first film. A costume drama, it involved preparing barroom and log cabin sets and managing a cast of about thirty children for the crowd scenes. Nell was played by a ten-year-old boy, following the convention of Huff's prep school and Princeton theater days. While his previous experience in theater prepared Huff for organizing the production and his work as an accompanist gave him a sensitivity to editing, he was apparently self-taught as a cinematographer. It is a credit to his talent and perseverance that the film made the 1931 "Ten Best" list for the ACL's magazine *Amateur Movie Makers*. The award also marks the importance of an organization like the ACL in its time. For an aspiring young man, the ACL's recognition must



Figure 8.1.

Frame enlargement from *Hearts of the West* (1931), directed by Theodore Huff. Courtesy of George Eastman House

have been very important. Huff's production scrapbook includes letters from ACL officials praising the effort.

Huff's production diary lists some additional projects at this time. He developed a scenario for "The Prince and the Pauper" in summer 1931, but the project ended after an attempt to shoot test footage in and around a church was blocked. That fall he wrote "Little Miss Caesar" for a Methodist Church youth club, but apparently could not get any lasting interest from the mostly female group. In December 1931 and January 1932, he made a film commissioned for a hundred dollars by the Russell Sage Foundation.⁵ This film, depicting the activities of the progressive social work organization and its staff, was shown at a retirement banquet for the director. Several people in the foundation or knowledgeable about film wrote letters praising it, and *Amateur Movie Makers* give it an honorable mention in its year-end "Ten Best" listing.⁶ In December 1932 Huff began work on a "Riverside Church film," and shot several scenes that were shown in January; at a meeting in February, however, he

"resigned" with no explanation. *What a Cook* was written in 1932 by Huff but photographed and directed by L. Wellender and shown at a party in April.

Huff's most substantial film from this period was in the same juvenile burlesque vein as *Hearts of the West*. *Little Geezer* (1932)⁷ was a more modest effort in length, cast (all-boy), and sets. Originally written for a Methodist church club, Huff revised it and shot on weekends from February to May, then quickly cut it. It was mentioned in *Amateur Movie Makers* and received an honorable mention in the year-end list. Huff entered it, along with *Hearts of the West*, in an amateur contest run by *American Cinematographer*, a respected professional publication, where it placed in the top ten. A letter from the editors about the judging remarked:

The acting of the players in *Little Geezer* seemed surer and more understanding. In entertainment value, the two pictures were closely matched—in fact, both of them were tremendously entertaining to the judges, all of whom had made many professional films of both of the types burlesqued—but the better tempo of *Little Geezer*, and its more succinct narration, gave it an appreciable edge.

This praise from Hollywood professionals must have been the high point of this phase of Huff's creative work. The correspondence indicates that he eagerly sought feedback from them. The ACL's magazine and letters to Huff often have a air of genteel clubiness, conveying a desire to encourage an earnest young man, as befits an organization promoting 16mm filmmaking, which was in numbers and economics largely an upper-middle-class recreation. (Its "Ten Best" lists always prominently include films that seem to be records of vacation trips to exotic locales.) The Hollywood judges are much more perceptive about technique and details. Amateur contests of all kinds are often ridiculed because they inevitably reveal a gap between ambition and accomplishment. This gap is easy to mock, especially in a competitive individualist culture where a large professional mass entertainment economy invites aspiration while rewarding excellence in conventional terms. For Huff, winning the contest and making the "Ten Best" list was national recognition, something not attainable in other ways. Thus, these amateur institutions provided validation that went beyond hobbyist amusement.

The letter from Hollywood explaining why his films were being returned must have been a disappointment:

We were holding *Little Geezer* to show it to Hal Roach, producer of the "Our Gang" comedies. We felt he would be greatly interested in seeing these pictures because of the youngsters you use in them and the way in which they conducted themselves, especially the little fellow who played the part of the Big Shot. However Roach has been so very busy that we could not get an appointment with him as soon as we expected.

Many young filmmakers hope that a film will give them a toehold in Hollywood. John Flory recalled at a memorial meeting for Huff, "The one thing I can do best," he used to tell me, "is to direct kids. I'd like to make films like the "Our Gang" comedies."

MR. MOTORBOAT'S LAST STAND, 1933

In June 1933 Huff met John Flory, a twenty-four-year-old Yale graduate, and they began work on a satiric comedy of the Depression. Flory was interested in putting his available resources into a short film that he could use as a "calling card" to try to break into Hollywood. The credits for the film have always named Flory as writer and director, with Huff listed as "assistant in photography"; in the titles, Priscilla Peck is also credited as an assistant. Flory's experience in filmmaking at this point was limited, having previously only worked on Steiner's *Panther Woman of the Needle Trades* (1931), while Huff had four years of experience and had won awards the previous year. Huff's production diary supports the listed division of labor, but he was probably key in translating the script into shots and sequences, and he must have been essential to the editing, which tells the story with no intertitles. Flory and Huff spent about five days a week shooting in July and early August, did some additional shooting in September, and cut *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand* in six days in October.

Subtitled "A Comedy of the Depression," the two-reel film begins with the hero, Mr. Motorboat (played by Leonard "Motorboat" Stirrup, a professional tapdancer), waking up at dawn in an auto junkyard. In a montage sequence marked by very effective closeups, he tunes in a radio program, does calisthenics, and puts on his clothes, with a series

of sight gags on the theme of attempted dignity in the face of economic adversity. For example, he adds spats to his shoes, but a huge hole is evident in the sole of one (fig. 8.2). He shaves using a piece of tough rope for a brush, a knife for a razor, and an auto's rear-view mirror for a shaving glass. He then produces a frying pan and egg, makes breakfast, and feeds his pet rabbit. He places cigarette butts in a silver case, puts on a straw boater (with a hole in the top), adds a flower to his lapel, picks up an umbrella and a briefcase, and strides off, finding in a trash container a copy of the *New York Times* to carry. The scene is much in the mode of Chaplin, though the whole is carried by the effective shots and cutting, unlike Chaplin's typically static camera and long shots. The actor thus is not asked to reproduce the subtlety of Chaplin's whole-body mime, but instead is a plastic element within the fairly fast-paced montage. An African-American, Mr. Motorboat is seen as



Figure 8.2.

Frame enlargement from *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand* (1933), directed by Theodore Huff and John Flory. Courtesy of George Eastman House

comic but without Coon or Sambo stereotyping. The junkyard sequence is very effective and may well be the model for a similar opening in the Elia Kazan/Irving Lerner/Molly Day Thatcher satiric short *Pie in the Sky* a few years later.

Now that our hero is ready for the world, a junkyard vehicle beckons—literally, as, through the magic of editing, the door opens and closes to attract him. He appears to himself as a chauffeur, and enters the car to be driven by his double. Then follows a clever sequence in which the car seems to be moving, and cutaways of the passing scene and spectators give the impression of traveling. Arriving at his destination, Mr. Motorboat sets up his apple stand and prepares for business with the same tidy attention to detail we saw earlier: washing each piece of fruit, trimming, and polishing. His rival, a white roughneck, sets up a stand nearby, and the two sneer at each other when a passing woman stops for an apple. Mr. Motorboat tips his hat with smiling courtesy, while the rival puts up a misspelled sign, “Unemploid war veterin,” and crudely polishes an apple on his clothes. The woman now sees that Mr. Motorboat offers, according to a newly produced sign, “sanitary apples,” and has, moreover, magically acquired a spiffy white uniform.

Losing the sale, the rival goes off in disgust while Mr. Motorboat suddenly appears in Wall Street with his tiny capital. He “fishes” with his change-maker and reels in (the line is stock ticker tape) stock certificates. This montage is edited together with shots of balloons on which the years 1928, 1929, and so on are inflated, expanding tires, bubbles in a bubblepipe, and shots of the rival climbing a steep hill with a barrel and then taking aim at Mr. Motorboat’s stand. Conceptually funny, this intellectual montage, which seems indebted to the Soviet silent-film editing style, comes to a climax when the barrel speeds downhill to knock apart the apple stand, as the balloons burst and apples go flying, finally raining from the sky on the unwary.

His stand a mess, Mr. Motorboat seems about to resign, when he spots his rival, who now has the coin-changer, and a chase ensues. The chase is well done. The two run about, and Mr. Motorboat assaults his opponent with a small popgun, resulting in several “x” marks on the other’s body. Finally the rival escapes in a car (fig. 8.3) and Mr. Motorboat contemplates suicide (closeups with double exposures of a poison bottle, a hangman’s noose, water: fig. 8.4). But then he is shown back at his old stand, where a group of white workers throw dollar bills at

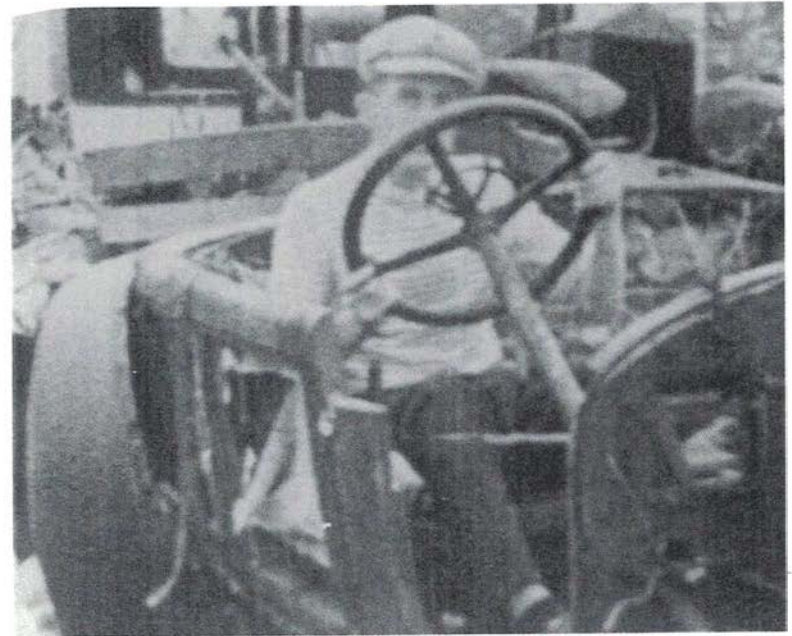


Figure 8.3.

Frame enlargement from *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand* (1933), directed by Theodore Huff and John Flory. Courtesy of George Eastman House

him while he performs the old magic trick of pulling his rabbit from a top hat.

Mr. Motorboat is shown as clever, resourceful, and quickwitted. The film is surprisingly free of racial stereotypes, while also avoiding the sentimentality often found in Chaplin. Its strength is in its wit, efficiency, and clever pacing. Showing the down-and-out as self-reliant was a progressive message during the Depression. As a project it worked for Flory, who quickly obtained a seven-year contract with Paramount.⁸ The film brought Huff little success or recognition, however, although it made the ACL's "Ten Best" list, and was praised several times in *Amateur Movie Makers*. Huff finished one more film along with Mark Borgotte: *Ghost Town: The Story of Fort Lee* (1935), a short, undistinguished documentary shot in the abandoned Fort Lee studios, recalling their glory days through intertitles.⁹

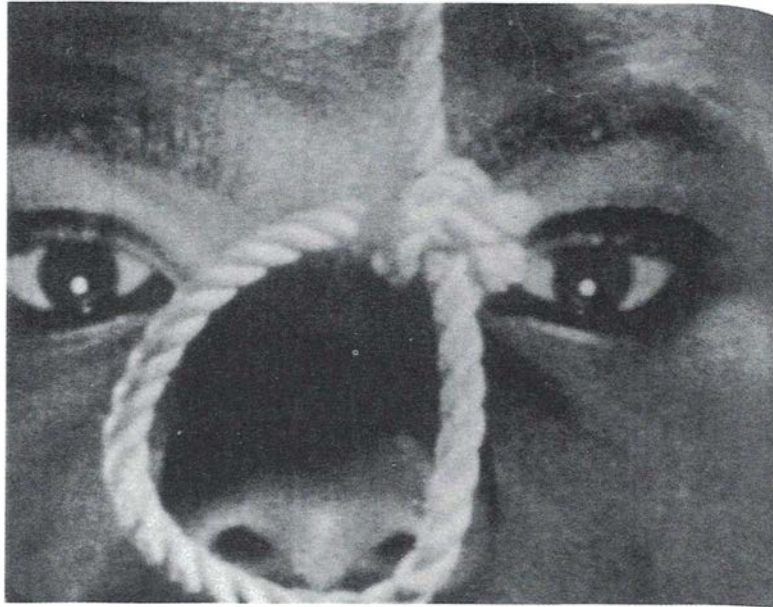


Figure 8.4.
Frame enlargement from *Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand* (1933), directed by Theodore Huff and John Flory. Courtesy of George Eastman House

LAST EXPERIMENTS

Huff made no films for the next twelve years. After he began teaching, he co-directed two projects with his former student Kent Munson. *The Uncomfortable Man*, a psychodrama about an alienated young man, is similar in conception, style, and mood to the work of Willard Maas and Curtis Harrington around this time. Jean Cocteau (especially his 1930 *Blood of a Poet*) and Maya Deren suggest themselves as inspirations (fig. 8.5). Its general direction is well captured in a program note written by Huff:

This subjective documentary is a psychological study of a young man who lives in the chaos and confusion of a great city. The dividing line between reality and his dream identifications is very thin. Perplexed and frustrated, he retires to his underground room and ignores the world about him until the hero's schizophrenic personality splits. But eventually the forces of the city draw him into the Crowd, where he loses himself.

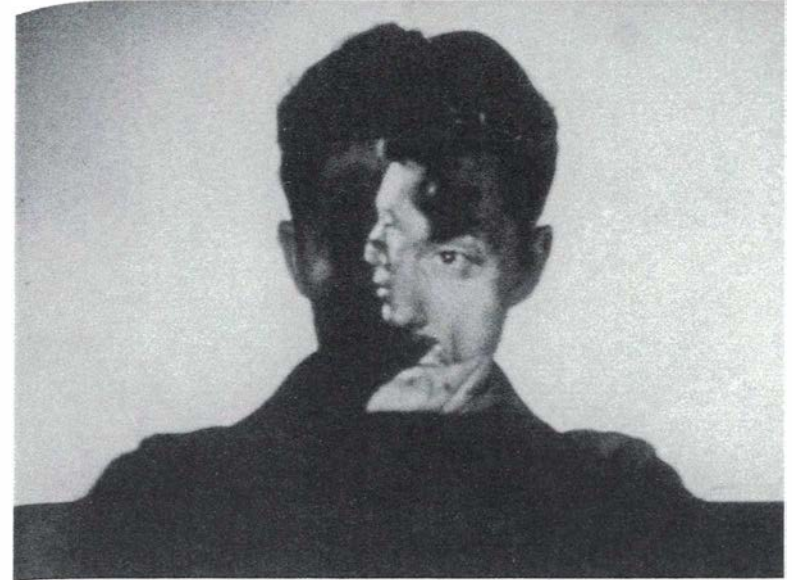


Figure 8.5.
Frame enlargement from *The Uncomfortable Man* (1948), directed by Theodore Huff and Kent Munson. Courtesy of George Eastman House

Documentary shots of New York City are intercut with shots of a young man in his room. Dream distortions appear in the interior sections with shots such as an image projected on a face. These evocations of memory and nightmare are contrasted with everyday shots of Washington Square oratory, a Salvation Army band, kids at play, sidewalk vendors, people being rousted out on the Bowery. The vision of personal alienation in the city is much like Dostoevsky's underground man. Shots of movies on 42nd Street at night are cut with distorting mirrors, while repeated and strongly canted shots in an Eisensteinian mode appear (fig. 8.6). The available materials suggest that the work was written by Munson as a longer dramatic piece and that only the first half of the script was actually shot. Then the piece seems to have been drastically edited to fit the images actually available rather than the original longer conception. It also seems from the assorted materials of this time that Munson provided the alienated young man theme (and played the lead) while Huff provided the expert re-editing.



Figure 8.6.
Frame enlargement from *The Uncomfortable Man* (1948), directed by Theodore Huff and Kent Munson. Courtesy of George Eastman House

The Stone Children (1948), made by Munson and Huff in Hollywood the summer Huff taught at USC, is a less successful followup. As Huff described it:

All sorts of tragedies and crimes go unnoticed beneath our very noses, from simple thefts to wars, but our increasingly artificial society places more importance in a fantasy-world than a world of reality, and because our minds are so drugged with the more-than-lifesize counterfeit of passion and violence (in movies, books, sports, music, etc.), we do not recognize the real things, or even worse, close our eyes to them. *The Stone Children* is an oblique allegory of an Exile's journey through the fantastic land of celluloid shadows. From his unsavory beginning to his psychotic end, he experiences in turn: anger, fear, pride, ambition, frustration, desire, remorse, confusion and madness. Played in counterpoint to the highly artificial shams of movieland, all these real emotions go unnoticed. Even his sardonic demise has ludicrous and theatrical overtones.

The film mixes black and white and color footage, and hand-held and tripod shooting, and prominently uses cross-cutting to demonstrate the contrasts of modern life. Again the alienated young man, played by Munson, appears cut against shots of Hollywood's presumed falsity. Yet the irony is thin and the statement seems forced because so much attention is paid to the interesting visual surface of Hollywood's glitter, and the young man's story seems overdramatized for a short narrative. Where *The Uncomfortable Man* used typical details of urban life to build its contrasts, *The Stone Children* uses Los Angeles details that are already encoded as exotic (Woodlawn Cemetery, Paramount Studios, Bel Air mansions, the Chinese Theatre, ocean piers, backlots, etc.), as well as celebrity moments (Louis B. Mayer, Sam Goldwyn, Chaplin, the Griffith funeral). The discrepancy between the ostensible message (this is all false and corrupt) and the obvious tourist fascination in the documentary material undermines the project. Sustained attempts to use amusement park images as metaphors of society's sham values seem pale clichés. Writing to Huff to explain why he had shown the New York film but not the Hollywood one at "Art in Cinema," the postwar avant-garde experimental showcase in San Francisco, Frank Stauffacher faulted Munson's acting and advised Huff that experimentalists were on shaky ground when trying to imitate what the industry could do so well.

The collaboration seems to have tried the patience and endurance of both Huff and Munson, and many notes attest to the frustrations on both sides. Munson is mentioned as active in New York City experimental film circles into the 1950s and then disappears from the scene. Huff made no more films.

HUFF AS FILM HISTORIAN AND TEACHER

Huff's Chaplin book, less biography than chronological discussion of the creative work, is his greatest achievement. It was definitive within its time and for years afterward. The first careful and substantial director study produced in the United States, it helped establish serious film studies, although it was done as a labor of love without institutional support. In a letter to Chaplin sent with a sample of his "handbook," Huff explained the research behind it:

In the year 1940-41 I managed in New York to see 54 of your total 76 films for the purpose of this book. On other pictures that have been

withdrawn I had complete notes, taken down at the time. Instead of the usual drivel, etc. written by "highbrow" writers, I have tried to stick to facts and to turn out a practical guide and discussion of your pictures, one by one.¹⁰

He was unable to get it published immediately. It was turned down by several New York publishers; then he claimed (there is no record) that it was accepted for publication by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but the war broke out and ended that plan. Attempts to interest Chaplin himself were rebuffed by the Chaplin Corporation, which wanted no "authorized" publication. (Unknown to Huff, Chaplin was anticipating writing his autobiography at the time.) It was not until the late forties that Huff found a publisher, a new small house that sought serious books.

Essentially a factual and descriptive study, the Chaplin book avoids making any strong evaluative statements or generating any overt analysis. The biography is constructed with sympathy to Chaplin's side in every dispute, professional, business, or personal, drawing on the existing journalism. But most of the book is a recapitulation of the plots of the various films with observations about changes or innovations in the Tramp persona, cast, or some other area.

Without academic training as a historian, Huff saw his mission as getting the facts correct. Among his papers is a list, unpublished but circulated in typescript, of "hundreds" of errors (mostly dates off by a year, as Huff marked with apparent anger) in Lewis Jacobs' pioneering and then-standard history of American film. While believing that history consisted primarily and essentially of "facts," Huff held that the cinema should have a canon based on aesthetic quality—a principle he apparently thought was self-evident. In an undated document, probably from the mid-1930s, he constructs a list of about a hundred "Films for a Permanent American Theatre (or Museum) of the Cinema." Today the list seems unexceptional, if one takes into account that it was constructed from knowledge of films actually available and thus omits entire national cinemas (e.g., Italian, Japanese) and major works then lost or unknown (e.g., many Soviet silent films), and assumes the dramatic narrative mode as the norm. In the mid-1940s, while working at the National Archives, Huff took sharp exception to Barbara Deming's argument that aesthetically inferior works could be given equal attention in preservation and archiving for purposes of later historical study.¹¹

Among the papers are unpublished pieces in typescript, such as a complete shot-by-shot script of *Birth of a Nation*, including the length of

each shot. This work was subsequently mimeographed on legal-sized paper with stiff covers and copyrighted, published, and sold by MOMA in 1961.¹² Other notes include descriptions of two German films of the Nazi era, *Ohm Krüger* (1941), set in the Boer War with British villains, and *Die goldene Stadt* (1942), an anti-Czech propaganda film. The papers also include what we might call applied history: lists of film music available from the Library of Congress, notes on the musical accompaniment for *Broken Blossoms* (1919), an arrangement for piano of the symphony orchestra score for *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), done for a screening during the war at the Washington Workshop, a cinema society. And his papers include stray items like this apparent "fact": "Tom Mix never on screen smoke, drank, lied, or killed."

In one document from about 1950 Huff claimed, referring to himself in the third person, that "while in Washington, due to his persistence, the Library of Congress dug up their early 1896–1912 films which they had buried in the cellar." Credit for the discovery is in dispute, however. Patrick Loughney's dissertation credits a library clerk, Howard Lamarr Walls, for the discovery, and then-Librarian Archibald MacLeish for understanding its importance. Moreover, the discovery took place at least a year before Huff's arrival at the National Archives.¹³ But Charles Turner's correspondence with Huff and memory of their conversations places him at the discovery.¹⁴ According to this version, Huff moved to Washington in the summer of 1941 with the intention of tracking down the collection. He appealed to many librarians who were not responsive and finally recruited and trained Walls (both were active in the Library's film society). Doubtless Huff's expertise helped establish the importance of the find.

Huff apparently began collecting cinema materials at an early age and continued the practice throughout his life. Several trunks of papers that he put in storage in the 1930s were destroyed by a flood, but in the mid-1940s he estimates that he had 10,000 film stills ("said to be the most comprehensive private collection"), and in 1949 he estimates 15,000. Upon his death and the donation of his papers to the George Eastman House, it was announced that 30,000 stills were received. In addition, he had a large collection of silent film music and cue sheets, and apparently he first came to the notice of film curator Iris Barry at MOMA when he offered information about music for *Intolerance* and she responded by inviting him to screenings of early films.

As most collectors are, he was in touch with other collectors, although he does not seem to have been involved in extensive trading or buying

and selling for a profit. When he worked for MOMA, he allowed the museum to duplicate many of his stills. MOMA then sold prints, apparently at some profit. As the uncredited and unpaid source for many stills in the MOMA collection, Huff was angry at what he saw as an exploitation of his original good will and carefully assembled personal resources. But Huff never had the business sense or merchandising acumen to make money for himself from the limited but definite market for his collection, which must have been the most substantial part of his estate. (Huff seems never to have owned any real property; he lived with his mother at various times, and most of his years in New York City stayed in YMCAs and residential hotels. That he took a very humble civil service job in 1950 seems evidence that he had few financial resources.)

During most of his professional life, Huff served as a critic working in a characteristic essay genre of the time: the informed program note for a film society or museum screening. These essays were about a thousand words long and fitted on two sides of a mimeographed sheet. A standard, virtually obligatory, item at nonprofit film screenings from the 1930s through the 1970s, the film notes format provided cast and credit information as well as an expository essay that typically provided pertinent information about production practices and a general aesthetic interpretation and evaluation of the work, and often placed the work in the director's career. In a time when serious and accurate reference books in cinema were rare, college classes in cinema virtually nonexistent, and thoughtful criticism unusual, film screening notes provided a valuable resource in an audience's self-education.

His files contain multiple versions of essays on the same classic films, slightly revised for each subsequent publication. These are evaluative essays on masterpieces, and Huff clearly explains each film's excellence in aesthetic terms applicable to the cinema. Everything else—the social and political significance of the work, how it relates to the society and historical moment in which it emerged, and so on—tends to be ignored. Huff painstakingly documented *Birth of a Nation*, to his mind a masterpiece, but never wrote a line about its racist content, and in the Chaplin book excused its use of blackface grotesques as a convention of the time.

Huff taught in three of the pioneer cinema studies programs in the United States as they were being established and expanded after World War II. At NYU he taught film production and film history; at USC and CCNY he taught film history. The records he kept were sparse, but from

some syllabi, examinations, and a typescript of notes from his USC lectures prepared by one of his students, the courses seem conceptually unremarkable: history is again a collection of important facts organized in terms of conventional national cinemas and historical periods, with screenings of major works depending on which ones were in circulation. A USC lecture on sound results in a long, consecutive list of technological innovations from 1857 on but with no reflection on technological change in general or in relation to film aesthetics.

One USC lecture ends with the note: "DAVID WARK GRIFFITH DIED AT 8:25 A.M., JULY 23, 1948 IN HOLLYWOOD CALIFORNIA." This item captures what Huff thought was most important: the exact time of an event, its importance being affirmed without further reflection (the death of the Greatest Artist of the Twentieth Century, as his college essay put it), and assembled into a pre-existing framework.

Even without academic credentials, Huff might have secured a regular teaching position by offering equivalent professional experience (a fairly common practice in new academic disciplines and the arts in general). Certainly his Chaplin book would have supported his case. Huff was an awful teacher, however, and that was an insurmountable handicap. A long letter from department chair Robert Gessner, written after he visited Huff's NYU class, details the miserable quality of his classroom performance. And during an exchange of ideas about film history that took place in *Film Culture* in 1958, Hans Richter, who headed the CCNY program recalled:

The late Theodore Huff was acknowledged as one of the most conscientious fact and date-finders in the realm of film history. He was quoted during his lifetime and is quoted today as the ideal film historian. On account of this quality, I engaged him to give a course in film history. His facts and dates were as exact as they could be. His success as an instructor, though, was negative. At the end of the term, there were few students left.¹⁵

It is hard to see Huff as a lasting success at anything, given his personality and the ample evidence that he was fairly neurotic. In correspondence, longtime friends setting up a meeting frequently add, "Don't fail me this time!" or similar phrases indicating that he did miss engagements. One undated note from a "Bob" or "Ben" left at the hotel where he lived in the 1940s and 1950s urges: "Ted—Don't just disappear. Let's talk. The atom bomb hasn't destroyed NYC yet!" His friend David

Bradley writes from Los Angeles in 1950 that the art house theater-owner Raymond Rohauer in conversation called Huff "a weak character." In remarks for a memorial program at George Eastman House, John Flory noted, "If Ted ever had a fault, it was his great and innate humility. Quick to appreciate ability in others, he regularly discounted his own unique talents."

Theodore Huff seems basically unable to imagine how others thought of him, or what others were thinking and feeling in a social situation—a skill necessary for good teaching and writing drama. Thus, he was unable, for example, to write dramatic screenplays except as parody of existing work. He is frequently insecure and underrates himself, characteristics for which his correspondents chide him. Most disagreeably, from my perspective, Huff exhibits a passive-aggressive syndrome in which he attacks people behind their back. In the early 1940s he writes to Mary Pickford and Chaplin, obsequiously praising them while decrying MOMA. His anger remained active, and in January 1952 he proposes writing an article on MOMA "films stolen (by them!)," films burned and ruined, left-wing political activities, and lack of scholarship.

In today's media culture Huff might have found a niche for his talents because the system as a whole is sufficiently specialized to validate and employ someone with his skills, and the institutions within it can teach an individual the related skills needed to hold down a job. Had he gotten a Ph.D. (none were offered in film at the time), he would have been socialized into the expectations, the manners, and the protocols of academe—the ideology of the system. He might have been a dull and fairly inept teacher, but he would have known how the system operated, worked as an apprentice teaching assistant, spent several years sitting in classes as an apprentice in the profession, and thus learned, on some level, to evaluate the process of teaching from the daily examples offered by his mentors. And he could probably have kept his job, or kept some kind of academic job in an expanding market for film scholarship. Or he could have come to the early realization that he was temperamentally unsuited to teaching and moved into a related position that did not call for it: working in a media library, an archive, a media art center, or some form of arts administration. In the still-developing media culture of the first half of the twentieth century, however, there were few such places, and those that existed were often tangential to the larger institutions that set the pace. The Amateur Cinema League, film societies like "Art In Cinema" and "Cinema 16," and the small-circulation serious film

publications were started and kept going as labors of love, not as sponsored institutions. In Huff's time there was only one MOMA Film Library, and he burned his bridges when he left it. Huff did not have one place or one line of career development; as it turned out, he occupied several different sites at different times. Entering his mid-forties, when most professionals are well established in a career, and perhaps facing the luxury of a mid-life crisis, Huff achieved professional distinction with his Chaplin book. At the same time, he must have experienced personal humiliation when the only employment he was offered was the low-level clerical position of assistant casting director for the Signal Corps at Astoria.

There are two ways to look at Theodore Huff's professional and personal life. From the point of view of the overall system, of society in general, which accepts an ideology and practice of bourgeois individualism, Huff was a film nerd *avant le mot*. Underdeveloped socially, he was overinvested in film as an object of study. He knew almost everything there was to know about it, it seems, yet he was unable to capitalize on that knowledge. In the political economy of the intellectual labor market, he was a useful yet expendable item. Such a person, in our time, in our culture, is held responsible for his or her own failure: "Get a life!"—the slogan of the Reagan-Bush era.

From his own perspective, however, the same ideology of bourgeois individualism turned Huff into a self-validating person. He became a priest of the cinema—a low priest, to be sure, but a person devoted to service without regard for personal gain. Each humiliation validated his vocation. He was concerned with the ordering and arranging of cinema, with its proper interpretation and fixing its "facts" in the proper place. He was obsequious to the authorities he recognized, carefully learned the roles and rituals that needed to be carried out, attended to the proper procedures, and devoted himself to preserving the icon-photos of his saints. He preserved texts of all sorts like holy relics. He lived what seems, to an external viewer, a celibate life in extremely modest, one-room circumstances. Huff never traveled except for his one summer pilgrimage to Hollywood, bonded only with men, seems not to have socialized with married couples, single women, or any relatives except his widowed mother, and was in his own way blessed by being in this environment.

There are hints in his collected papers that Huff lived as a very closeted gay man. For example, as he turned forty, we find that a letter from his mother tells him to look for a "wife" (quotation marks in

original) and settle down. It is tempting to "out" Huff in order to compare him with his contemporary Parker Tyler, a flamboyant dandy in the 1930s and a well-known homosexual writer and film critic (long overdue for recognition as a major gay intellectual figure). Both men published books on Chaplin at about the same time, but where Huff's is methodical and prosaic, Tyler's is witty, intellectually adventurous, and characterized by Tyler's trademark leaps of imagination and avant-garde style. Huff was part of a different movement, a different style. He was entranced by old films, especially by silent films, but he was unable to develop a larger analysis of them except to appreciate their technique (of which he had a great practical mastery). After the war, a younger generation used a slightly derisive term for his type—a "foof," a friend of old films. Theodore Huff probably would have accepted the label without hearing the sarcastic dismissal.

NOTES

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1. This analysis is based on archival research in the Theodore Huff papers at George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y. (GEH). My work there was limited in two significant ways. First, it turned out that the materials available were much more extensive than initially indicated, and my time was limited to three long

days. The full collection of Huff materials includes his extensive collection of at least 15,000 stills, mostly from Hollywood films; I did not examine that portion of the collection. While I was able to examine every single item in his personal papers, and make photocopies of the most important ones, I did not have the opportunity to carefully correlate all the material. I am reasonably sure that my conclusions do justice to the materials, but there are probably minor points that could be refined. The individual items in the Huff papers have not been arranged or separately indexed or catalogued. In numerous cases the papers include one or more draft versions of typed correspondence, with his own written emendations. I do not know what was actually sent, and I have had no opportunity to check the papers of his correspondents, even those documents that are known to exist (e.g., the Flory papers at Ohio State University are uncatalogued and unavailable; the Stauffacher papers are available at the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California, Berkeley). I have received summary information and comments on an earlier draft from Ron Magliozzi, assistant supervisor of the Film Study Center, MOMA, based on the letters from Huff to Charles L. Turner from 1942 to 1953 and interviews with Turner in the MOMA archives. Turner also provided ten pages of comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Second, of the various films available, only *Mr. Motorboat* had been restored at the time I was in Rochester. I was able to watch it numerous times, but in other cases I could only view the archival material once, taking notes while seeing films for the first time. *The Uncomfortable Man*, in particular, deserves a much closer and more detailed study than I could give it at that point. The most interesting discovery was a series of letters and scripts from Gregory Markopoulos from the late 1940s, which would be important for anyone researching the early career of that major independent filmmaker.

2. Theodore Huff, *Charlie Chaplin: A Biography* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951).

3. Huff, 1933. All otherwise unreferenced quotes are from the Theodore Huff papers, GEH.

4. Ron Magliozzi's research suggests that Huff's dismissal from MOMA followed acrimonious inter-staff wrangling between him and the Soviet film expert Jay Leyda. Leyda was forced to resign from the Film Department following publication of an article smearing him as a leftist propagandist by Seymour Stern, "Film Library Notes Build 'CP Liberators' Myth," *New Leader* 23 (March 1940). Some context and details can be found in Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), chap. 7. Huff blamed "communist influence" for his departure from MOMA, with his strongest anger reserved for curator Iris Barry, who fired him.

5. The film was 900 feet in 16mm, but is apparently lost.

6. In all of these projects another person working on it with Huff is mentioned, but the creative roles are not clear. For the Russell Sage film a "Miss Perry" is mentioned, perhaps a foundation staff person.

7. 500 feet. The original 16mm reversal print has been preserved at GEH.

8. Flory left after a few years and a change in management, tried unsuccessfully to develop a script, and returned to the East. He worked in a film processing lab and eventually became the Eastman Kodak representative to the nontheatrical film market, a position that made him well known to the entire independent filmmaking sector.

9. This 16mm film (400 feet) is also preserved at GEH.

10. Letter, Theodore Huff to Charles Chaplin, 1942.

11. Deming wrote "The Library of Congress Film Project: Exposition of a Method," *L of C Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions* 2, no. 1 (July–September 1944): 3–36. Deming and others were employed in the project of determining which of the 1,400-odd films a year that were submitted for copyright should actually be archived. She and the research team worked at MOMA under a Rockefeller grant. Huff's response is in several heavily revised typescripts of his letter to the head of the Library of Congress, but it is not clear that a final copy was actually sent. Huff's vehement and personal attack on Deming is such that it would be easy to imagine that a friend reading it in draft form would counsel against sending it. Huff's letter dismisses her as a "college girl" (she had a master's degree), and includes a smear of Deming as a left sympathizer, a claim he also made about Iris Barry, head of the MOMA Film Library, after she fired him, and Siegfried Kracauer, the emigré film historian. The critical results of Deming's work are contained in her book on 1940s film, *Running Away From Myself* (New York: Grossman, 1969), somewhat similar to Kracauer's study of German Expressionism, which reads the films as symptoms of a general American social-political consciousness during the war. Films undistinguished in conventional aesthetic terms can be very important in such an analysis, a type of criticism quite different from Huff's values and practices.

12. The paper is described as "A Shot Analysis" done by Huff "circa 1939." Given his longstanding hatred of his former employer, Huff would have been outraged by this "exploitation."

13. *A Descriptive Analysis of the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection and Related Copyright Materials* (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1988). Loughney's information is from LOC documents and phone interviews with Walls in the 1980s.

14. Huff–Turner letters and other materials, Film Study Center, MOMA. Author's personal correspondence with Magliozzi and Turner, November 1993.

15. Hans Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," *Film Culture* 4, no. 3 (April 1958): 26.

9

Ralph Steiner

SCOTT MACDONALD

Like his predecessors on the American alternative filmmaking scene, Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand (*Manhatta*, 1921), Ralph Steiner was an accomplished photographer before he turned to film. His interest in motion pictures began as an extension of his still photographic work, though he gave up on his first film, the focus of which was funny road signs, when he "realized that . . . if you're making a film, what you were filming should move. Revelation!"¹ His first completed film, *H₂O* (1929), was a major contribution to independent cinema, as well as an audience pleaser. In a filmmaking career that spanned forty-six years, Steiner would produce or contribute to twenty-five films.

For purposes of this discussion, Steiner's filmmaking can be divided into three periods: an early period (from 1929 to approximately 1933) characterized by individual experimentation and exploration; a second, "political" period (from 1934 to 1942) during which he collaborated in a variety of ways with other filmmakers and with film production groups; and a final period (from 1960 to 1975) during which he returned to explore the cinematic terrain he had discovered in his first films. In all three periods, Steiner's contributions to North American independent cinema are noteworthy.

EARLY EXPERIMENTS

In an article co-written with Leo Hurwitz in 1935 as a means of clarifying their new approach to filmmaking, Steiner described the sense of film history from which his early experiments had developed:

During the twenties we grew disgusted with the philistinism of the commercial film product, its superficial approach, trivial themes, and its